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What is a minor international theory? On the limits of ‘Critical International Relations’.

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Key words

International Relations, Minor theory, critique, Critical IR.

Abstract

This article argues that ‘Critical International Relations,’ often counterpoised to ‘mainstream IR,’ has come to function as a major theoretical category in its own right. It argues that critique involves ‘minor theorising,’ defined as the practice of disturbing settled theoretical assumptions in the discipline. The article examines the role and significance of ‘minor theories’ in the context of ongoing debates about Critical IR. It argues that critique is defined by context, and is politically and ethically ambiguous. The article concludes that the scope for critique could be advanced if the terms ‘Critical IR’ and ‘Critical IR Scholar’ are dropped from scholarly parlance.

Introduction

In the 1980s ‘Critical International Relations Theory’ began to be rhetorically counter-posed to ‘Mainstream IR Theory.’¹ ‘Critical IR’ is not a marginal subfield or theoretical subculture of disciplinary IR. Academic departments, particularly in the UK, self-define as leaders in Critical IR, and sections at leading International Conventions self-define using the nomenclature of Critical IR. The label ‘Critical’ is used in IR job descriptions, as an identifier carrying symbolic capital. The rise of ‘Critical IR’ as a recognised category during the last three decades has been accompanied by the institutionalisation of various Critical sub-disciplines in book series with major publishers and Journals explicitly devoted to giving space to ‘Critical’ forms and styles of IR knowledge production – with titles like Critical Security Studies, Critical Military Studies, or Critical Terrorism Studies. These journals determine their object of study as a field of scholarship around an issue (like Terrorism, Militarism or Security), which ‘Critical IR Scholars’ argued they can address with greater nuance or under a guiding ethos of emancipation.² Major international studies journals now expressly seek “submissions from allied critical traditions,”³ which means that adopting the title of

‘Critical IR Scholar’ may be viewed as a professional obligation in these settings, especially by younger academics.

Should scholars committed to the vocation of academic critique be celebrating the rise to power of ‘Critical IR’ as an identifying label? After all, it appears to have aided theoretical pluralisation within disciplinary IR, and opened space for novel, often ethically and politically engaged, scholarship. This article contributes to an emerging body of work in the discipline asking whether scholarship in IR needs to “bring the sword of criticism to criticism itself.”⁴ The article argues that the identifier ‘Critical IR Scholar’ has become a problematic label by which to describe academics, giving rise to significant downsides for scholarship in the field. To some extent this is a permutation of the problem of categorisation and labelling that all academic disciplines face. All theoretical categories commonly used in IR, such as Realism, Idealism, Liberalism, are all known to hide diversity, and Critical IR is no different.⁵ In this article, I argue that ‘Critical IR,’ as a category of scholarship, creates specific sociological and methodological issues that are distinct from the problem of categorisation in general, because it can undermine the practice of critique itself.

The article begins by examining the difference between the practice of critique within the academic field of IR and the critiques people conduct in their everyday lives. Following Deleuze and Guattari, and Katz,⁶ I argue that what distinguishes the practice of critique is a “minor” relationship to established theoretical literatures about IR, which have distinctive historical and sociological conditions. Scholarly critique involves ‘minor theorising’ because it disturbs settled theoretical assumptions that structure debates within any academic setting. This is not the same as ‘criticism’ in an everyday sense, or speaking in the name of marginalised groups in society.

The second section explores the rise of ‘Critical IR’ as a sociological category within the discipline, distinct from the practice of critique. This section observes that ‘synoptic’ understandings of the role of critique in IR, as developed by Hoffman (1989), and updated by Levine (2012), make the case that Critical IR theoretical projects all cohere around the pursuit of reflexivity.⁷ I argue that this synoptic framing of ‘Critical IR’ inhibits the practice of critique inasmuch as it operates as an injunction to nuance. The article then examines ‘anti-synoptic’ accounts Critical IR, and of the role of critique *in* IR, which can also be traced back to the late 1980s.⁸ Examining the contemporary disciplinary subfields of Decolonial and Queer IR, this section outlines the problems that can follow from the presumption that engaging in critique signifies possession of a virtuous Critical identity, and that ‘to be Critical’ scholars have to go ‘beyond’ disciplinary IR.

The final section draws on the previous arguments to answer the question ‘What is a minor International Theory’. I conclude that the scope for academic critique within IR will be advanced if the terminology of ‘Critical IR’ and the ‘Critical IR Scholar’ are dropped from scholarly parlance. Firstly, scholarly critique in IR will become more methodologically *rigorous* by abandoning the

assumption of moral probity as a defining characteristic. Secondly, scholarly critique in IR will become more *useful* inasmuch as it will be communicable to relevant audiences as distinct from ideological positioning. This will enrich debates about the politics and ethics of IR theory, rather than conflating politics and ethics with disciplinarity.

On lay and academic critique in IR

It has been proposed that is difficult to distinguish between critiques taking place within the sociological setting of professional academia and critiques occurring within the settings of politicians, torturers, military officials, or people selected at random from the general population.⁹ In this section, I argue that critique means something distinctive within the academic field of International Relations. I also distinguish between practicing critique in any academic discipline, and self-defining as a ‘Critical Scholar’ of IR.

The term ‘Critical’ has a specific genealogy within IR as a field of study. It emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s to mark the difference between so-called ‘mainstream’ theoretical schools of thought and approaches born out of new conceptual and methodological tools drawn from adjacent disciplines, including continental philosophy, anthropology, and feminist sociology.¹⁰ Its use as an identifying label by scholars in IR is often associated with the revival of Marxian accounts in the context of the ‘inter-paradigm debate’,¹¹ drawing from the Gramscian tradition popularised by Robert Cox (1981) in making a distinction between ‘Problem Solving’ and ‘Critical’.¹² During the 1990s, ‘Critical’ began to be used widely as an identifying label in IR.¹³ Two broad strands within Critical IR could be differentiated by their attitude to the revival of theoretical pluralism at this time.¹⁴

During the early 1990s a group of scholars drawing from the Frankfurt School tradition in philosophy proposed re-centring the discipline of IR on ‘Critical’ theory. This would bring the assumptions held by existing major paradigms (like Neorealism and Neoliberalism) about objectivity, power, scientific method and prediction, into question. These self-describing ‘Critical’ scholars committed to emancipation as a core scholarly concern, which could re-orientate the field around a shared or *synoptic* vision of the discipline’s vocation for fostering emancipation.¹⁵ IR’s various Critical Studies Journals tend to enunciate this case for the emancipatory potential of ‘Critical’ theoretical work in IR today.

The second broad strand of ‘Critical’ IR derived from Francophone philosophy, especially Foucault’s account of the relationship between power and knowledge in the social sciences, and often involves a particular reading of Kant’s account of enlightenment.¹⁶ Scholars drawing from feminist, continental, and poststructuralist philosophy in the late 1980s and early 1990s developed a radical critique of the idea of progress in IR, tied to wider critique of the logics of modernity (including patriarchy and colonialism) finding expression *as* disciplinary IR.¹⁷ They agreed that the

distinguishing characteristic of ‘critique’ is that it disturbs the assumptions of settled mainstream IR theories, but argued that critique cannot form the nucleus for disciplinary reform. Rather they advocated for a *de-disciplinarisation*, moving ‘beyond IR’ into a purified Critical post-disciplinary or trans-disciplinary space.¹⁸ Only such de-disciplinarisation would allow self-describing Critical IR scholars to speak to the needs and interests of groups excluded from the concerns of mainstream IR theory. This linked, explicitly, academic marginalisation within IR to the marginalisation of communities or other actors in world politics on racial, cultural, gendered or class lines.¹⁹ Sjoberg has articulated this reading of Critical international theory as a “noncumulative” or *anti-synoptic* project, on the assumption that privileging marginalised forms of knowledge production fosters scholarship that better serves the needs of all marginalised groups in world politics, and that this project requires moving beyond disciplinary IR.²⁰

What critique means for IR, and what it means ‘to be a Critical IR Scholar’, has always been subject to debate. The term Critical IR is now used to refer to diverse theoretical subcultures, including Frankfurt School, Gramscian, poststructuralist, feminist, marxist, post-marxist, postcolonial, queer, and decolonial theorists, which overlap, combine and assemble in various ways. Its manifestations in academic practice are correspondingly diverse: in scale and number of adherents, as well as in epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies.²¹ The term ‘Critical IR’ clearly hides internal diversity, as all categories do,²² but the category ‘Critical’ has been identified as uniquely ambiguous and thus potentially suspect.²³

To understand why, it is necessary to examine how self-describing Critical IR Scholars articulate the commonalities across different approaches, and the integrative role of the category ‘Critical IR’. Synoptic and anti-synoptic Critical IR scholars, from diverse theoretical subcultures, argue that critique is characterised by a concern for “tracing and challenging given limits” in IR, which are in turn associated with material and discursive architectures of oppression.²⁴ The marginalisation of those who, for example, lack a state, are impoverished, hold ambiguous identity, or belong to a race or gender identity subject to discrimination, can only be addressed through efforts to enhance disciplinary ‘reflexivity’ with respect to IR’s theoretically given limits.²⁵ Reflexivity helps scholars to better recognise the relationship between facts and values in IR, and better manage the tendency to confuse concepts of analysis for the world analysed. Reflexivity improves cognisance of scholarly positionality or bias. Critical IR scholars all agree that ‘being Critical’ is related to ‘being reflexive’. What is at stake between synoptic and anti-synoptic strands of Critical IR is the question of whether reflexivity can become a *disciplinary* method or technology, or whether ‘being Critical’ requires reflexively ‘going beyond’ the category of disciplinary IR altogether.²⁶

Borrowing from francophone critical sociology, some related debates have recently been imported into IR, which ask whether academic critique is really not so unlike ‘everyday’ critique.²⁷

These arguments centre around the sociological study of the ‘the way people argue’ about things.²⁸ Any IR scholar, inasmuch as they are engaged with empirical material, is entangled with social relations that involve criticism, and has an obligation to take seriously the *reflexive* facilities of the everyday actors one is engaged with as a researcher.²⁹ Attention to ‘lay’ resources of ‘reflexivity’ is seen as facilitating understanding of the contingent and ambiguous qualities of critique. For example, emancipation can mean different things to different people, so the idea that one can be ‘critical’ as opposed to a ‘problem-solver’ appears overly simplistic.

Recent work has also highlighted that pre-existing political and ethical positions constitute frames by which “critical” and “uncritical” works are differentiated from one another in IR scholarship, suggesting it may be difficult to reflexively disentangle assumptions about what constitutes ‘the good’ from scholarly determinations of the critical.³⁰ Identifying as ‘Critical’ is often viewed as a statement of alliance with the oppressed or marginalised: Whereas actors may perceive themselves to be oppressed, use critiques to explain that condition, yet advocate for reactionary politics, racism or gender violence building on these critiques in search of their emancipation from power structures they perceive as unjustly constraining them.³¹ Recognising the ubiquity of its practice in ‘everyday life’ is to see that critique can be politically and ethically ambiguous.³²

The assumption that critique within an academic space is *identical* to critique in the everyday sense of ‘criticism’ deserves more careful scrutiny, as authors like Billig³³ and Felski³⁴ have suggested. The suspicion of settled assumptions underwriting all critiques arises from complex social settings. Yet the setting of scholarship is distinct, and academia is a field of practice wherein actors possess different capabilities and engage in specific kinds of activity (academic publishing, teaching, and going to conferences) which are unavailable to lay actors. Scholarly settings involve sociological dynamics which capture criticism for distinct purposes, under different power relations. Entry of new academic members into IR is controlled by existing ‘insider’ communities, and IR is well known to have specific power relations that constitute the conditions *for* criticism, which may be related to, but are not identical to the structures which organise other fields or everyday life.³⁵

Disciplinary IR is a distinctive setting for critique because what is in dispute amongst IR scholars are discipline-specific theoretical and social formations, tied to the literary paradigms that structure debates within the field.³⁶ Professional scholarship is a field of relationships between actors in which “control of the reproduction of the institution (that is, control of positions, appointments, and of the allocation of financial and other resources)” is a determinant factor for reception as a major figure or member of a major disciplinary body. Policing the boundaries of what constitutes a major contribution to scholarship often involves “softer formulas, such as censorship through academic propriety”, which include the obligation to reference ‘major’ figures or ‘major’ research programmes irrespective of the degree to which one finds them relevant.³⁷ International theories are outputs of a social practice, extended through time, which designates the boundaries of what a

legitimate problem is within IR scholarly communities and literatures, and function as markers of identity, status and prestige, leveraged in disciplinary struggles for power.³⁸ IR theories are self-disciplining material and intellectual assemblages, with physical and social architectures, and internal rules and codes, taking shape as distinct IR *literatures*.³⁹

This is a useful starting point for assessing the function of ‘Critical IR’ as an identifying category within the discipline today. In their essay, *What is a Minor Literature*, the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2004) argued that every language (whether spoken widely or not) has a “major use” which enacts coherence, creates rules, and seeks to hold meaning firm within an architecture of grammar and terminological associations. The major usage reflects the manner in which all linguistic forms are tied up with specific social and cultural codes and material institutions or assemblages. Every language (scientific or otherwise) also has a “minor use” which disturbs these codes, making the language “stammer and proliferate”. A minor use of any literature breaks or bends grammatical rules, and in the process, let new insinuations or literary forms take shape.⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari were interested in how languages are attended by processes of variation at their edges; local idioms, rule-breaking, hybridisation and mixture with neighbouring languages.⁴¹ They argued that such variation is attached to scientific, political and artistic creativity. When one submits a language to minor use, as they argued the author Franz Kafka did to the German in which he wrote, it opens the potential to find new uses for words, to say new things, or express problems differently.⁴²

In her 1996 essay “Towards Minor Theory”, Cindi Katz argued that Deleuze and Guattari provided tools to examine practices of theorisation and the production of knowledge within her discipline of Geography.⁴³ Katz noted that “the major and minor are not so much different languages as different uses or treatments of the same language”.⁴⁴ ‘Minor uses’ are such not because they are written by or for a minority, but because they disturb a major architecture of orthodoxies, assumptions, and rules that constrain expression, thinking and doing. For Katz, ‘minor theory’ was a useful concept because it revealed the complex relationship between criticality and marginality in her academic “present moment” orientated by the “cultural turn” in the social sciences during the 1980s and 1990s. This ‘turn’ had brought greater attention to intersecting economic, gendered and racialized power relations ignored by mainstream theoretical paradigms across the social sciences.⁴⁵

For Katz, the distinction between minor and major theory was a tool to examine unequal relationships between critical theoretical traditions, particularly feminism and Marxism. Katz did not propose a “binary” account of the relationship between minor and major theory:

“I want to suggest not a simple opposition but an interpolation of major with minor theory. Following Deleuze and Guattari, I consider major theory to be contextually defined. It encompasses

the theory or theories that are dominant in a particular historical geography under a specific set of conditions. It is major because it is dominant in a particular historical geography, not the reverse. Minor theory, then, might best be conceptualized as interstitial. It is defined as minor in relation to a dominant major theory, but as the contexts change, so too can the designations of major and minor or the boundaries between them... as a feminist in the academy interested in oppositional theory during the 1970s, I operated within a discursive formation—and practical politics—that was Marxist. Within this specific and perhaps small mud puddle, Marxist theory was 'major theory'”⁴⁶

Katz’s reading of minor theory as ‘interstitial’ and ‘contextual’ provides a toolbox for reflecting on the problem of critique within the context of theoretical pluralism in IR today. IR theories constitute major literatures, inasmuch as they are identified with specific presentational styles, jargons, lingos, terms, references and assumptions that define *what knowledge is* within that category, setting and historical moment. These tacit rules are policed through peer review, by editors and by hiring panels. Critical IR scholars consensually understand their work as disturbing the norms and assumptions that organise ‘mainstream’ IR theories, so we may fruitfully understand Critical IR as pursuing a ‘minor use’ of theory in an ideal sense. To engage in ‘minor theorising’ is not, however, the same as being critical of something in an ‘everyday’ sense. It is to conduct academic work which disturbs a body of norms of articulation *within theoretical scholarship in a particular time and disciplinary location*. This is why ‘reflexivity’ about IR requires a level of expertise often unavailable to ‘lay’ actors.⁴⁷

Katz’s reading of Deleuze and Guattari is not uncontested. Whitehall implicitly challenges Katz’s vision of the minor theory as interpolated with the major, inasmuch as he emphasises that minor theory does “not *necessarily*” have any relationship to the major.⁴⁸ For Whitehall, mainstream disciplinary IR *is* the major literature. He suggests that critical work in IR must be work that seeks to become otherwise, irrespective of disciplinary assumptions. His implication is that Critical IR is problematic inasmuch as it is *insufficiently indifferent* to mainstream IR and its settled assumptions about, for example, sovereignty and modernity. Minor theory is valued positively, for Whitehall, because it necessitates doing something *other than IR*.⁴⁹ By contrast, Katz, in viewing minor theory as always contextually and relationally defined, was suggesting that minor theories (in the plural) are interpolated with diverse major theories (in the plural) in any academic sociological context. For her, therefore, the major and minor are uses within every literature or discipline, and theories may change position and appear as ‘major’ or ‘minor’ in different contexts. This opened up the potential for considering the ambiguity of minor theories, and their complex relationship to major theories.

I follow Katz account here because, to my reading, it was central to Deleuze and Guattari’s argument that there are no guarantees in the departure from categorisation *per se*. To provide some

background, Deleuze and Guattari's two principle texts were *AntiOedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988), in between which they wrote *Towards a Minor Literature* (1986).⁵⁰ Over the course of this collaborative work, Deleuze and Guattari sought to draw attention to the dangers that accompanied all minor literatures (or 'lines of flight'). *A Thousand Plateaus* broke from the binary argument of *Anti-Oedipus*, which had counter-posed the major (bad/totalitarian) to minor (good/creative). The later book argued for "caution" because, they suggested, minor literatures can lead to the entrenchment of new majoritarian formations, or descend into wholly destructive, suicidal, masochistic, sadistic or fascistic urges.⁵¹ In this sense, Katz appears to be following Deleuze and Guattari in arguing that minor theories should be understood with respect to specific conditions of utterance within her discipline, rather than as a generically virtuous exodus from it.

In this light, the minor status of self-describing 'Critical approaches' to IR three decades ago cannot provide an on-going condition for the possibility of critique within this discipline. Nor should 'being Critical' be conflated with a virtuous 'minor' exit from disciplinary IR altogether. Rather, 'Critical' approaches to IR have shown increasing capacity to order the material, social and institutional conditions for academic work within IR (for example, hiring and publishing practices, and organisational leadership), and therefore include various major literatures (Gramscian and Feminist IR, for example, are now well-established, important, *major* literatures). To evaluate the role of critique in international theory today requires acknowledging the distinctive architecture of IR theories and their material conditions which structure this setting, but also the role that the label 'Critical' itself has in constituting a setting in which IR scholars who identify as such are not marginal, and may themselves be placed within major disciplinary power relations.

Minor theories, inasmuch as they disturb settled theoretical assumptions, by definition involve critique. Where I differ sharply from Katz, alongside Whitehall, is that I see few grounds to assume that the criticality promised by minor theories tends towards being virtuous, or ethically and politically desirable.⁵² Disturbing settled literary assumptions can involve being racist, homophobic, a religious fanatic, an extreme nationalist, an advocate of cathartic violence for the purpose of personal pleasure, or carelessly pursuing self-aggrandisement and professional prestige as a 'marginalised' academic radical.⁵³ Deleuze and Guattari made clear that they saw minor theories as creative and intellectually enlivening, but for the same reason possessing diverse ethical and political, wholly self-interested, murderous, or self-destructive consequences.⁵⁴ Inasmuch as it is always related to minor theory, critique is a condition of possibility for new international ethics or politics that are good, bad or ugly in realisation. Taking leave from the disciplinary mainstream can be but it is clearly not necessarily a virtue.

This is a reflection on the intellectual context of today. In our era, marginal reactionary thinkers are having an outsized practical influence in world politics, widely referenced by populist statesmen, alt-right groups, ultra-nationalists, and white supremacists, and described by such groups

as emancipating them from the fetters of modernist ideology.⁵⁵ To critique effectively we must recognise that these marginal thinkers are critical about things too. The distinction first proposed in the 1980s between a sovereign modernity playing out *as* IR and virtuous marginalised critics who seek an exit from the power relations of the discipline, is a rhetorical trope that might appear to have passed its sell-by-date in an era defined by reactionary critiques of modernism in IR.⁵⁶

Disciplinary IR is a loose assemblage of major literatures, tied together by a network of social relations, and material institutions like departments, associations and journals, within which some assumptions are more settled than others, each showing a complex intellectual genealogy. There is no essence of IR literatures, organising all its settled assumptions. Undoubtedly settled major theoretical assumptions about IR can and have harmed the interests of specific groups, minorities and global majorities.⁵⁷ How they have done so, and may continue to do so, is an empirical question. The major or mainstream status of a theory within academic IR is an imperfect heuristic for comprehending these political, social or cultural consequences, or role in human emancipation or oppression. For the same reason, conducting minor theoretical work that disturbs settled disciplinary assumptions is unable to provide surety of likeable impacts. This is to suggest that more critical thinking about ‘Critical IR’, as a definitional term or category, is called for today.

Critical IR and the Discipline

‘Critical IR’ may involve a synoptic⁵⁸ or anti-synoptic⁵⁹ attitude to the role of critique for the discipline of IR as a whole. In this section I engage with synoptic approaches which argue that Critical IR can bring diverse theoretical approaches together in addressing the problem of ‘reification’.⁶⁰ I argue that this intellectual move inhibits critique, and tacitly supports the rise of a generic ‘Critical IR’ scholarly identity.

Contestation between theoretical paradigms has long been seen to risk the collapse of IR as a saleable, scientific venture.⁶¹ Holsti (1989) argued that IR risked the rise of “pluralism without purpose... extreme theoretical and methodological relativism... an intellectual life without standards.”⁶² It has been argued that IR scholars must therefore seek to build bridges between major theoretical paradigms so as to recover a synoptic understanding of the discipline as a whole.⁶³ Hoffman was an early advocate for this kind of argument, arguing that Frankfurt School Critical Theory allows scholars to identify the strengths of each major IR paradigmatic approach and “show[...] how they can be drawn together” in synoptic dialogue.⁶⁴ He expressly rejected claims that “drawing diverse perspectives into a synoptic whole is of no particular value,” and that IR theory should just be about “subversion of orthodoxies”.⁶⁵

It has been suggested that IR theoretical paradigms provide ‘windows’ or ‘perspectives’ on different aspects of international reality, which might be synthesised through dialogue.⁶⁶ “Practices”⁶⁷ and “pragmatism”⁶⁸ have recently been proposed as potential focal points for such disciplinary dialogue. These approaches have been criticised for obfuscating substantive points of

contestation, since the existence of various IR theories reflects the existence of incommensurable theoretical choices.⁶⁹ There is a serious risk of eliding what is *at stake* in partisan representations of international relations.⁷⁰

Daniel Levine responded to this problem in his 2012 book “Recovering International Relations: The promise of sustainable critique”.⁷¹ He argued here that to avoid eliding the political stakes between major architectures of problematization in IR, or “why particular issues come to be known as problems”, yet retain a synoptic vision for the discipline, necessitates a “critical-reflexive form of theory” in the Frankfurt School tradition. His understanding of critique sees it as an embrace of the vocation of practical reason, whilst holding in tandem the idea that all theory is reliant upon reification and cannot make good on its promises. His approach is dedicated to exposing “the interconnections between facts and values in international theory”,⁷² so as to allow for the recovery of IR to a synoptic “vocation” to support the positive stewardship of a complex world.

Levine (2012) viewed a degree of “reification” as inherent to the “fact/value tradition from which a[ny] body of theory emerges”. Reification cannot be removed, but tactics can be devised by which to “remember its effects and contain them”.⁷³ By “incorporating sensitivity” to each major theory’s specific reifications, each theory’s potential for excess can be “checked” in much the same way as one might check for “mistakes of logic, argument, or fact”.⁷⁴ To “sustainably critique,” then, is to recognise that all IR theoretical paradigms problematize the world in different but incomplete ways. Levine thus advocated for a “multi-paradigmatic” thinking, which “strives to manage reification in an ongoing manner” because each major paradigm can “tell stories in their own terms and counterbalance other stories, such that no single one can ever encompass the whole of a given event”.⁷⁵ Levine’s recipe for Critical disciplinary synopsis was to hold all major paradigms in permanent torsion.⁷⁶ It is by advancing *nuance* across these theories that critique allows progress for IR as a discipline without political de-contestation.⁷⁷

It follows from viewing critique as a function of reflexivity, *vis-à-vis* the problem of reification shared by all theories in IR, that *being more nuanced* is a defining aim for those who ascribe to a synoptic vision of Critical IR.⁷⁸ This is an idea with a long heritage in the context of debates about theoretical pluralisation in IR. Holsti (1989) had argued that “the first significant purpose of pluralism is too alert us to oversimplification” in individual accounts.⁷⁹ Hoffman (1987) advocated “moving back and forth between critical theoretical frameworks and individual perspectives”.⁸⁰ The only rationalism committed to by such an approach, Hoffman (1988) wrote, would be an “limitless invitation to criticism”, and to the inherent fallibility of all truth claims.⁸¹ Levine (2012) thus enriched and updated the synoptic account of the relationships between critique and disciplinary IR, developed in the late 1980s. His aim was not to establish which theories reify more or less.⁸² Rather, fostering chastened critique of each theory by the others creates conditions for more *nuanced storytelling* across the discipline.⁸³

Viewing the objective of critique as being more nuanced about international issues has some well-known downsides. The ethical and political implications of nuance are contingent on circumstances, and in particular the unequal power relations between different theories in the academy, which Katz described.⁸⁴ The problems with being assigned the role of reflexive ‘nuancer’ in IR are perhaps best encapsulated by Robert O Keohane (1989) in his account of feminist works as providing nuance to Liberalism, implying that the value of Feminism lay in its supplementary contribution.⁸⁵ Feminist critics of the Frankfurt school approach advocated by Hoffman (1988) had already argued that seeking a synoptic ‘Critical’ next stage in the collective disciplinary conversation invariably meant that someone and some purpose would be rendered supplementary.⁸⁶ Critical scholars often express the belief that they are more nuanced about international issues than their ‘mainstream’ peers, but the practical result of bringing ‘critical’ IR theories into nuancing dialogue with other IR theories has most often been to reinforce settled problematizations and methods of interrogation.⁸⁷ Effective critique is targeted at structural elements of other theories,⁸⁸ so the injunction to ‘be more nuanced’ must sometimes work in the opposite direction to critique. It is debatable whether “demands for more nuanced approaches” in IR could ever facilitate a break from settled disciplinary assumptions.⁸⁹

There is also a close family resemblance between the synoptic account of critique developed by Levine (2012) following Hoffman (1989), and the assumptions that have resulted in ‘Critical IR’ being widely used as a disciplinary identity or identifying category for scholars. Use of the label almost always implies that ‘being Critical’ entails being more sophisticated or nuanced. Levine himself argues that all theories are to some extent reflexive and need only to better “sustain their reflexive moment”: Reification is a technical error, dealt with like mistakes of logic or fact.⁹⁰ But this sits in tension with the practical reality that naming a journal ‘Critical’ means it will attract submissions from a more or less predetermined set of theoretical approaches, and ideological commitments. Levine (2012), in practice, advanced an efficient argument that, due to its superior sophistication, Critical IR constitutes the only *sustainable* major paradigm in IR, notwithstanding his observation that critique has a “tendency to exclusionary counter-orthodoxies and ideologies”.⁹¹

Viewing critique as a technical attribute of superior reflexivity, which can be extended to the discipline as a whole, also limits consideration of how claiming membership of ‘Critical IR’ is itself a performative act. It is well known that IR’s theoretical categories sustain their boundaries by obscuring internal diversity.⁹² Reflexivity, understood as attention to the reification characteristic to any analysis, cannot synthesise the diverse intellectual projects that sit within Critical IR - including; feminisms, anarchisms, decolonial theories, postcolonial theories, poststructuralisms, and marxisms - which vary in understanding of what constitutes a reification, or how reflexivity might be achieved. To identify reification (to suggest an academic opponent is confusing concepts with reality) is an interpretation deployed in academic disputes for a variety of purposes. One might accuse a reifying

scholar of falling foul of a methodological mistake, engaging in data manipulation to achieve a false positive, or suggest that they are racists motivated by more or less unconscious bias,⁹³ or all the above. Unsurprisingly no IR scholar is generally keen to confuse concepts for reality. Rather, as Levine notes, all IR scholars (or professionally competent scholars from any academic field) assert ‘reflexive’ means to acknowledge and control the role of assumptions in their work.

This suggests that identifying reification may be little more than a value judgement projected at the categories used by others, tied to a claim to be the more reflexive. As Knafo (2016) argued, a claim to reflexivity can reflect the “certitude of reflexive scholars that they are on the ‘right side’ and thus often becomes a privileged vehicle for self-promotion”.⁹⁴ Assigning a synoptic role to critique in IR necessitates the reification of reflexivity as a disciplinary method or technology. The category ‘Critical IR,’ inasmuch as it relies on this move, can thereby inhibit reflection on the meaning of the wide diversity of methodological, epistemological, ontological, political and ethical claims contained within it.

Beyond IR?

Reflexivity is subject to the eye of the beholder, since what defines any IR theoretical language are the things which cannot be said. This issue was raised by poststructuralists in the late 1980s, who argued against all attempts to speak with a “sovereign voice” about IR. Rather than pursuing a synoptic dialogue between IR theories, the poststructuralists sought “to enable the further circulation of the new strategies of questioning, analysis, and resistance that... have been found effective in one or another site and that might prove provocative and workable in other sites as well”.⁹⁵ George and Campbell (1990) pointed out that the ambiguities within traditions are what provide the “space for critical exploration”.⁹⁶ George (1989) lamented the ways in which gatekeeping forces authors to think in terms of either “incoherent babble” or “convergence” around a new orthodoxy.⁹⁷ Ashley and Walker (1990) called for “dissident” international theorists, emerging “from the margins” in relationship to diverse sites of struggle in international politics, to “eschew [the] heroic promises” of each major theory that they should be the one to take the discipline forward to its next stage.⁹⁸ This imagined the project of critique in IR as Katz described minor theory, “it tears at the confines of major theory; pushing its limits to provoke a line of escape, a rupture—a tension out of which something else might happen”.⁹⁹

The poststructuralist writings of the late 1980s and 1990s have influenced IR scholars, across diverse IR theoretical subcultures, arguing that ‘Critical’ work is more closely aligned with the interests of the marginalised, repressed or ignored in the international arena than ‘mainstream’ IR. Being Critical, following Walker *et al*, was seen to signify a disruption of all settled theoretical assumptions and categories in IR, thus intrinsically allied to ethical and political concern for the interests of those marginalised by mainstream IR, such as “women, minorities, poor people, and

residents of small states.”¹⁰⁰ In this section, I outline some of the downsides that have emerged, as the anti-synoptic understanding of the role of critique for IR has become widely accepted in the discipline since the 1990s.¹⁰¹ I will focus in particular on Decolonial IR and Queer IR. My purpose in selecting these theories for discussion is that both are still emerging as ‘minor theories’ within the field, are not yet fully institutionalised, and share an anti-synoptic account of the relationship between critique and the discipline.

Decolonial scholars see eurocentric assumptions as constitutive to all international theory.¹⁰² The aim of Decolonial theory, in line with longer established ‘postcolonial’ approaches, is to reveal the particularity of and “provincialize” assumptions common to theories rooted in western scholarship.¹⁰³ Decolonising international theory aims to reveal the legacies of colonial history within IR theory, and in doing so make possible new insights into and approaches to world politics.¹⁰⁴ This is expressly not a matter of pursuing nuance as a synoptic intellectual or disciplinary objective.¹⁰⁵ In a recent work, Vitalis (2016) excavates the little-known history of the Howard School of International Affairs. Vitalis’ hope was “that an unvarnished account of [racisms] role in the founding of the US profession will matter to those... seeking to ‘decolonise the academy’”.¹⁰⁶ Revealing the history of the idea of racial hierarchy within disciplinary IR was to expose the historical, political and ethical contingency of all theorising in IR.

Seeking to make IR theoretical traditions more attuned to the subject of race is not the same as decolonising them, however. The ‘decolonial theoretical option’, in Mignolo’s terminology, is a matter of thinking from the complex borderland of colonial histories, epistemologies and ontologies which have been and continue to be repressed by the ongoing condition of “coloniality”.¹⁰⁷ Decolonial approaches seek to draw from “alternative realities” constructed in these indigenous spaces, cultures and cosmologies, whilst ensuring these are not presented in too “broad brushstroke and one-dimensional ways”.¹⁰⁸ Decolonial theory seeks to move creatively beyond a structural condition, identified as “coloniality,” by attending to local experiences of that condition. This project thus appears aligned, to some extent, with Deleuze and Guattari’s description of minor literatures, and Katz’s definition of “minor theory”, as disrupting established orthodoxies and rules that constrain expression, thinking and doing.

The resonances with the work of the poststructuralists of the late 1980s are also notable, inasmuch as Decolonial IR theory does not offer a ‘Critical’ disciplinary synopsis. Decolonial theory sees itself as embarking upon an anti-synoptic movement ‘beyond’ the discipline. As a consequence, Decolonial theories are critically positioned with respect to IR as a discipline inclusive of all its major theories, including those self-describing as ‘Critical’. The substance of decolonial criticisms of ‘Postcolonial IR theory’, for example, has been that their borrowings from ‘colonial’ intellectual traditions mean that their critiques are stymied in advance. The fit of this theoretical project under the label ‘Critical IR’ is widely questioned. Capan (2017) notes, “decolonisation should not be used

inter- changeably with being critical of the field of International Relations. The roots of one's disenchantment with the field may vary, and as such the direction of the 'criticality' itself... Being critical of International Relations and wanting to change the field does not amount to wanting to 'decolonise' the field".¹⁰⁹ Likewise, Tucker (2018) worries that "the 'critique of IR' serves... as an implicit or explicit master-frame [which] structures engagement with coloniality as a problem space in the discipline, making disciplinary assumptions and conventions the focal point of decolonial critique".¹¹⁰ 'Decolonial' and 'Critical' IR theories are not inherently allied traditions.

Queer IR theory shows a similar concern to avoid its conflation with a generic idea of 'Critical IR'.¹¹¹ Queer IR is a subculture of gender studies research which is concerned to sustain a marginal disciplinary status as distinct from Feminist, poststructuralist or Critical IR more broadly. Cynthia Weber's (2015) response to the question 'Why there is no Queer International Theory?' asked why, given the range of contributions to the problematization of defining 'international problems' by queer theorists, including "war, security, sovereignty, intervention, hegemony, nationalism, empire, colonialism, and the general practice of foreign policy" such accounts had no presence in IR Journals. Weber argued that the absence of Queer Theory "from prestigious IR journals and book series... is the (un)conscious effect of how so-called Disciplinary IR codes various types of theory as failures". The marginal status of Queer theory was a function, she argued, of the heteronormative assumptions by which the major IR theories define their boundaries. Weber's (2015) point was that all major IR theoretical "figurations are condensed maps of contestable worlds." Contesting the coherence of architectures of problematization within IR is described as "minor" theoretical work by Weber.¹¹²

Weber did not advocate for the inclusion of Queer theory into the IR theoretical canon, in line with the anti-synoptic account developed by poststructuralists in the 1980s. She recounted instead how Critical Theory in IR has undergone a process of what she refers to as "gentrification" through conversations with major IR theoretical paradigms since the 1980's. New theories, which developed new problematizations of international phenomena, had framed themselves as forming a "'critical theory' enclave, a kind of East Village of multiple, interdisciplinary-mixed IRs whose residents have relatives in a vast range of other disciplinary neighbourhoods".¹¹³ Disciplinary IR scholars saw that engagements with the emerging "critical IR traditions were met with what they experienced as aggressive assaults on their core ideas and on the character of Disciplinary IR itself". This resulted in the figuration of these contributions as unhelpful or unconstructive, but also "recognizing that this peripheral area producing marginalized intellectual ideas could potentially re-centre and revive a discipline in crisis, some Disciplinary IR scholars took up residence in this edgy neighbourhood".¹¹⁴ The result, Weber argued, was a "softening" of the more direct critiques of the major theoretical problematizations, which "created toned-down gentrified versions of critical IR's ideas that were compatible with both what Disciplinary IR most valued (being 'a realist and a

statist’) and what Disciplinary IR viewed as being critical enough”. Critical theories were made bearable for the disciplinary orthodoxy by ignoring structurally threatening critiques, and becoming more nuanced instead.¹¹⁵

Construing the critical function of Queer theory as adding nuance or sophistication to other IR theories would be, in Weber’s account, to limit its capacity to unpick major theoretical problematizations, assumptions and mappings. Yet, it is also recognised that the pursuit of a sustainable position as intellectually marginal is fraught with uncertainty.¹¹⁶ With institutionalisation, any theoretical critique must shed the power to provoke breaks from common sense as settled assumptions (about, for example, what is a reification, who is reifying, and how reflexivity should be applied) are established. Just as the conflation of Decolonial theory with a generic understanding of ‘IR Criticality’ risks flattening or generalization of indigenous worlds,¹¹⁷ Queer theorists like Weber worry explicitly about the generic valorisation of minor theoretical status under a new *disciplining* “anti-normativity norm”.¹¹⁸

A response to this logical problem facing all minor theoretical work in IR, in recent years, has been to emphasise the constitutive role of failure in all critiques, drawing on the queer theorist Halberstam.¹¹⁹ As Sjoberg put it “failure should be understood as a key part of practices of critique”. Indeed, “reflexivity can exist without the desire for success; critique can revel in its failures rather than striving not to fail; critical security studies can be critical security studies without a coherent narrative of its purposes, shared values, and goals.”¹²⁰ The currency of this discourse of ‘critical failure’ appears to reflect the structural problem facing all anti-synoptic accounts of critique outlined by Katz: Minor theoretical status is inherently transient and contextual, and creates no safe harbour in which to anchor common intellectual projects.

The roots of this issue in IR were already observed by Holden (2002), who referred to the “new conceptions of intellectual radicalism within Western academies” which arose during the latter part of the twentieth century, and gave rise to an intellectual aesthetic that generically valorised the peripheral, the dissenter, and the marginalised outsider.¹²¹ The subsequent proliferation of self-consciously ‘marginal’ academic tribes in IR, as in other social scientific disciplines, was supported by changing material incentive structures which rewarded academic specialisation and abstraction.¹²² The accelerating churn of minor turns, moments, and concepts de jour that this aesthetic has given rise to has been productive in quantitative terms of fostering new minor scholarly subcultures. But as these theoretical subcultures coalesce into stable disciplinary formations or categories, their minor status naturally dissipates, recurrently leading to the launch of new theoretical turns, which tend towards more radical or maximalist positions, so as to recapture ‘marginal’ or ‘dissident’ academic status.¹²³

This process has implications for how conversations between minor theories in IR have developed. Queer and Decolonial IR, for example, are critical of the discipline in quite different

ways, respectively concerned with IR's heteronormativity and coloniality. It is possible to connect these two concerns, but thinking this connection requires theory-building so as to explain how heteronormativity may be linked to coloniality across different contexts.¹²⁴ Such intra-minor theoretical alliances must be constructed, yet the minor disturbance of settled assumptions does not itself provide any reliable synthetic tools.¹²⁵ Because theoretical synthesis cannot arise from minor theorisation as such, minor theories cannot preclude failures of synthesis (say, in the form of queer racism or decolonial homophobia).

The problem of synthesis stalks all self-defining Critical approaches to IR. Defining the terms of reference for intellectual dissidence in relation to IR's "disciplinary crisis", as the poststructuralists did in viewing critique as a function of disciplinary marginality, created conditions ripe for viewing any competitor theory as problematic to the degree that they can be deemed *insufficiently minor*.¹²⁶ The idea that critique necessitates moving 'beyond IR' as an inherently majoritarian project has become a widely expressed trope. The result is that Critical IR theorists now engage in increasingly virulent disagreements over the political and ethical implications of disciplinarity itself. In a condition of perpetual abeyance, claimants to Critical IR become hostages to a continuous risk of being exposed as insufficiently pure of the (modernist, racist, colonial, patriarchal, heteronormative, capitalist) traces of 'the major literature/discipline'. At the same time, Critical IR scholars who advocate for a disciplinary exit in search of 'more Critical' inter-disciplines have found themselves wrestling with the charge of pre-judgement.¹²⁷ Since they appear to know what 'Being Critical' will look like after de-disciplinarianisation, critique takes the form of testing whether other scholars meet these pre-given criteria.¹²⁸

This stream in contemporary IR scholarship ignores the manners in which minor theories, far from tending towards alliances, are often set to contradictory political and ethical purposes. And that the visions of world politics created by scholars 'moving beyond' disciplinary IR can be just as problematic as visions already settled within the discipline. Contemporary political and social movements borrow intellectual resources from various (once or still) minor theoretical traditions in IR to think against a 'Globalist' world order, incorporating the Gramscian position that 'politics is downstream from culture', the ideal of a transgressive emancipatory identity, and the critique of neo-colonialism.¹²⁹ The philosopher Alain De Benoist wrote his manifesto for the New Right in the year 2000 with the aim of challenging the oppressive implications of major international theories, especially Liberalism, borrowing widely from resources of minor intellectual critique.¹³⁰ This theory is marginal in disciplinary IR, but influential amongst populist politicians like Putin, Trump, Orban, Salvini and Le Pen, as well as online communities of Race Realists, western chauvinists, and white nationalists. It proposes that Liberalism destroys the autonomy of ethnicities and cultures, and that the history of the west has been one of ongoing cultural as well as political colonialism. De Benoist's

argument is that the project of decolonisation is incomplete, and continues through international aid and UN-led Liberal paternalism.

The answer proposed by the New Right is to restore a truly independent status to diverse cultures and indigenous world-views in International Relations, and suggest that people belonging to these ‘birth-cultures’ must actively work towards their national and cognitive emancipation from all the baggage of Liberal modernity, if necessary, through violently closing borders. The New Right claims its intellectual marginality vis-à-vis Liberalism or Globalism (understood as the ideological representative of modernism in international thought) is a marker of its virtue. The New Right is not, however, viewed as a ‘Critical ally’ of Decolonial IR theory.

A claim to minor theoretical status is also visible amongst reactionary theorists of gender, including online groups of men’s rights activists, western chauvinist militias like the Proud Boys, or traditionalist ‘family values’ movements.¹³¹ These groups develop an operative concept of the radical intellectual margins as central to their understandings of critique, and of the emancipatory relationship which their critique has to hegemonic theoretical frameworks that they perceive as oppressing them: Liberalism or ‘Cultural Marxism’.¹³² These actors see their critiques of what they term “gender ideology” as part of a necessary escape from the straightjacket of modernist categories, currently hegemonic in contemporary academia. In other words, the belief that *transgressive or marginal theory is emancipatory* has diverse advocates, whose anti-modernism or anti-hegemonism comes with divergent attitudes to gender, race, culture, economics, social, political and international organisation.

The sociological implications of this point were anticipated, but not fully developed, by Katz (1996), who noted that:

*“talk of exclusion can lead to an unsavory hierarchy of marginalization—a kind of competitive victimology—and even to the cul-de-sac of an essentialist identity politics. Notions of exclusion are all about, one might even say tautologically about, position, and if we are not careful they can lead to relativist accounts that offer little of practical value. And they can be disingenuous—proclamations of exclusion by scholars who are quite included”.*¹³³

The historical moment facing critique calls us to recognise that minor theories infer no allied ethics or politics. There is no cohesive and abiding sovereign ‘logic of modernity’ that forms the superstructure of disciplinary IR, and gives assurance that the post-disciplinary avant-guard will share an understanding of virtue. The romanticism characteristic of self-describing Critical intellectual cultures that arose in IR in the immediate Post-Cold War context must now be reconsidered. Many of the same intellectual tools are now being effectively mobilised by

reactionaries, racists and gender absolutists. Contemporary reactionaries have read their Deleuze, their Gramsci, their Derrida and Foucault,¹³⁴ and they are cognizant of the discursive logic and rhetorical power of, for example, concepts of exclusion, identity, precarity, marginality, hegemony, the avant-guard, victimhood and indigeneity¹³⁵.

The challenge facing scholars in IR who seek to write in the service of vulnerable groups, like migrants lacking a safe home state, those who do not fit with heteronormative gender roles, or the victims of racism, is that their reactionary theoretical interlocutors have recognised the power in claiming to be uniquely reflexive critics, intellectually marginal vis-à-vis dominant theoretical assumptions about IR. The category ‘Critical IR’ provides no tools by which to counter these relativistic arguments. In this context, the belief that ‘Being Critical’ requires a minoritarian exit from disciplinary IR may be a distraction from developing methodologically and epistemologically rigorous critiques, that can be communicated as such. Faith in the emancipatory intellectual margins brings to mind Latour’s worry that self-describing ‘Critical’ scholars today are like “those mechanical toys that endlessly make the same gesture when everything else has changed around them.”¹³⁶

What is a minor international theory?

Critical IR theories once considered marginal have been partially absorbed by ‘mainstream’ paradigms, or become major literatures in their own right. Many institutionally powerful IR scholars today were once described, by themselves or others, as marginalised ‘Critical’ thinkers. The prevalence of ‘Critical IR’ as a definitional category for identifying privileged yet marginal ‘kinds of academic’, now almost a cliché in the discipline, should concern any scholar committed to rigorous academic critique of settled disciplinary assumptions.

Critical theories (in the plural, not singular) are minor insofar as they are critical. But the category Critical clearly does not always signify minor theoretical work. It is a major category in contemporary IR, and the adoption and use of that category has come to interrupt the very conditions for critique. The distinction between minor and major uses of theory, as developed in this article, suggests we should view critique in IR as operationalised suspicion about settled norms of problematization within the discipline. Critique is a constitutive academic practice, which deploys minor theorisation to make possible the creation of novel ideas. Yet minor theory is inherently mutable, transient and contextual. Critique is constitutively unsustainable, and morally and politically ambiguous. Minor theoretical contributions are taken up by PhD students, and other scholars, and over time may be established as major approaches in their own right, as poststructuralist IR has been. The point is not that minor theories will *always* turn into major

theories. Rather, because they are relationally constituted, minor status is simply unstable as well as normatively ambivalent.

In the context of IR's professionalization since the 1980s, minor theories sought to capture intellectual resources, secure jobs, and publish work in journals sympathetic to their own methodological, epistemological and ontological innovations. In the 1980s and 1990s, the dominance of positivist, US centric scholarship, provided ample pragmatic grounds to seeking common cause with heterogynous minor theories, with the purpose of carving out shared professional space for these approaches. The label Critical was contested from the outset, but because there were professional and economic drivers for seeking common cause across minor theories, the category of 'Critical IR' came to be widely adopted despite disagreements about what it signified. Critical IR entails no inherent unity, binding together all minor theories, and it is likely that relatively few IR scholars believe that it does. The category 'Critical IR' functions rather as a sociological placeholder, of rhetorical use in manoeuvring for professional advancement and influence within the discipline.

This rhetoric has consequences. Self-defining 'Critical IR Scholars' tend to oscillate between ignoring those who also use the label, but with whom they disagree about matters of concern, and engaging in competitive wars of purity against other self-describing Critical scholars, who they may accuse of being racists, homo/transphobic, or crypto-capitalists due to their contamination by 'disciplinary' baggage.¹³⁷ Indeed, showing insufficient disdain for disciplinarity may itself be read as a sign of failing to be *critical enough*.¹³⁸ Whilst in the past there may have been less harm in self-defining using the category 'Critical' for professional advancement, slippage between this use of the category and sympathy for the inference that those who do not self-describe as such are 'un-Critical' was perhaps inevitable.

The degree of family resemblance between some self-describing Critical theories in IR reflects the pre-existing political and ethical assumptions of academics who already share a milieu. Inasmuch as the label 'Critical' acts as a signal for moral and political virtue within that milieu, it can embolden methodologically shallow argumentation, foster bunkerisation, paranoia, witch-hunts, and insularity. What emerged as a gathering place born of necessity, in an academic space that looked radically different from the pluralist disciplinary context that is IR today, risks becoming a shorthand for claiming (minor) moral probity, and hunting out (major) impurity in others. Critique, because it necessitates a minor use of theory, involves scepticism or suspicion about settled assumptions or categories. Self-defining as 'Critical', is contrariwise to suggest that the disruption of settle assumptions is a category unto itself, which implies virtuous political and ethical status, and a romanticised scholarly identity. In forgetting that critique because it necessitates minor theory is morally ambivalent, self-describing Critical IR theorists have invited their publics to view them as no more than an alternative set of ideologues.¹³⁹

De-romanticising critical theoretical activity in IR is the task recommended by this article. This is to acknowledge that within the so-called ‘mainstream’ of IR Theory, minor theoretical work takes place, and ‘Critical IR’ has always incorporated a lot of major theory building. In IR, minor theories can and have collapsed into major theories, as various Critical Schools have in recent years developed and honed their own distinctive brands, like Feminist IR Theory, Critical Security Studies, and International Political Sociology. Minor international theories can constitute major theories in some settings but not others. Minor theories can also, however, remain minor everywhere and advocate (successfully) for lamentable, regressive or cruel politics in the name of emancipation.

As such, I am certainly not suggesting that those who currently call themselves ‘Critical’ should start referring to themselves as minor theorists instead, but “a change in vocabulary” is nonetheless worth considering.¹⁴⁰ Simply abandoning use of the category of ‘Critical IR’ and the ‘Critical IR Scholar’ from scholarly parlance could help critique in IR to become more methodologically rigorous. As recent rhetorical disputes between self-describing ‘Critical’ traditions testify, competition about who is the ‘most Critical’ can vitiate the open potential in any IR theory.¹⁴¹ Analyses are degraded and receive a degree of inoculation from appropriate scholarly evaluation, when self-describing Critical Scholars imply that ethical and political purity (which may be defined variously) is the purpose and outcome of critique.¹⁴²

Secondly, dropping the categories of ‘Critical IR’ and the ‘Critical IR Scholar’ will help scholarly critique in IR to become more useful, inasmuch as it will be communicable to relevant audiences as distinct from ideology. Categorisation is an issue for all academic disciplines, and all categories in IR mask internal diversity. The issue with the category of Critical IR is not just that it obfuscates a peculiarly expansive diversity. Rather the problem which applies to this category specifically takes the form of a problematic intuition that the disciplinary margins will necessarily be intellectually allied with each other. The result is that the label ‘Critical IR’ is widely seen, by its advocates, to entail at least some essential normative, ideological, ethical and political, positions. This is why the New and Far Right are engaged so keenly with the arguments of self-describing Critical IR scholars, and are able to effectively to create mirror discourses.¹⁴³ Turning critique into a category inhibits its communicability as distinct from ideological claim-making. In deploying this category, therefore, ‘Critical IR Scholars’ have unnecessarily blunted their own tools for engaging with political and ethical controversies, and in doing so, given succour to their ideologically opposed interlocutors.¹⁴⁴

Disciplinary IR signifies a loose ecosystem of academic posts, institutions, journals, think tanks, debates, theoretical frameworks, methods and approaches, which overlap with various other academic disciplines. IR has always been traced by multi-disciplinary influences. Critiquing IR is not ‘good’ in some cosmic sense. Rather, there are multiple ways to critique IR, and this is good for

academia because it allows for the proliferation of edifying minor research agendas, which disturb settled theoretical assumptions and in doing so, may shed new light on matters of concern.

The continued search for a critical synopsis of disciplinary IR justifies, after the fact, the problematic construction of 'Critical IR' as a major theoretical category over the last 30 years. The conduct of minor theoretical work in IR has been inhibited by the institutionalisation of 'Critical IR' as a synoptic identity or category. 'Critical IR' is a uniquely problematic category because, as well as masking internal diversity, it undermines the conditions for critique by implying that it constitutes a normative alliance of methods and/or identities, rather than a descriptor of any work that disturbs settled assumptions. Critique does not require moving 'beyond' IR. Rather it is, I would like to believe, simply part of the vocation of any IR theorist to make minor contributions. A certain way of talking about and claiming criticality in IR "has sent us down the wrong path."¹⁴⁵ Though it has provided an academic home for many of us, it could now serve to enrich debates, in particular about the politics and ethics of theory in our field, if the category of 'Critical IR' and the 'Critical IR Scholar' are dropped altogether.

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³ Lisle, Debbie, Vicki Squire, and Roxanne Doty. "International Political Sociology: Critical and Collective Adventures." (2017): 1-4.

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